# GYNOCENTRIC STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE AMIDST CULTURAL SETUP IN THE NOVELS OF CHITRA BANERJEE DEVKARUNI

Synopsis

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## Introduction

GYNOCENTRISM which is derived from the Greek word *gyno*, meaning "woman," and *kentron*, meaning "center", is a radical feminist discourse that champions woman-centered beliefs, identities, and social organization. “Gynocentric” feminism that began to emerge in the early 1970s can be seen as the logical extension of the growing recognition by many feminist of the importance of gender as an organizing principle of individual identity and social recognition. Gynocentric feminism is concerned to revalue sexual difference and femininity positively. Gynocentrism thus focuses on *Women’s Oppression, Women’s Identity and Women’s Standpoint.* The new woman’s demand for due position, recognition and reverence is prompted by inner cravings to make her existence worthwhile. This existential struggle to establish one’s own identity, to assert one’s individuality and desperate fight to exist as a separate identity appears in all its intensity in the novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The novels focuses intently on these issues and expresses the experiences of women pursuing identities for themselves, the roles of women in India and America; the struggle to adapt to new ways of life when one's cultural traditions are in conflict with new cultural expectations; and the complexities of love between family members, lovers and spouses.

### A brief review of the work already done in the field

No work has been done on this aspect of Chitra Banerjee’s writing however other research works related to Banerjee’s writing with their titles are as mentioned below:

i) Representative diasporic strands of Alienation and Displacement in Chitra Banerjee Devkaruni’s ‘*The Mistress of Spices’*.

ii) Quest of Identity, Freedom and Independence in Chitra Banerjee Devkaruni's '*The Vine of desire'.*

iii) Negotiating with the past and contemporary life of Indian Woman: a study of the works of Shashi Deshpande and Chitra Banerjee Devkaruni.

iv) Urban and Rural narratives of Female Relocation in the novels of Chitra Banerjee Devkaruni's *Queen of Dreams* and *The Mistress of Spices*.

**Objectives**

This synopsis has the following objectives

i) To explore the novels of Chitra Banerjee Devkaruni to prove that archetypes,
gyrating gradually through myths and rituals are getting established in her works.

ii) To attempt a critical and historical analysis of Indian culture which has a self notion of being derived from socio, religious and political traditions and beliefs.

iii) To trace the root cause of gender based operations by applying many socio-religious theories, feminism and gynocentric theories.

iv) To establish the quest for identity of Chitra Banerjee through the characters in her novels.

v) To register the self asserting presence of Chitra Banerjee in a striking way by establishing parental conflict and relationship in her novels, and this has its roots in modern education.

vi) To point out how the character overcomes the feeling of despair through pain and suffering of sacrificial rites and achieves self actualization through a process of self realization in society at large.

**Note worthy contribution in the field of proposed work**

No work has been done in this field so far to the best of my knowledge.

**Proposed methodology**

Qualitative research method will be used. Research will be based on analysis of books by Devkaruni (primary source) and analysis of comments/reviews of those books (secondary source), as well as interviews by Devkaruni.MLA handbook on research methodology, (latest edition) will be followed throughout the work. The main part of the method is a close reading of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are her writings which will be scrutinized in the light of gynocentric, psychological and literary theories.Secondary sources include various book length and shorter studies on her work.

**Expected outcome of the proposed work**

The methodology aims at scrutinizing her literary achievements to establish that there is a new self concept emerging from the novels of Banerjee. This investigation familiarizes the reader with how gynocentric images, myths and legends enable the author to communicate her vision of reality which is essentially timeless and priceless.

**Bibliography**

This will consist of a list of novels by Chitra Banerjee Devkaruni which will act as primary source and all other works by the author as well as articles, reviews about the author and her work, which will act as secondary source.

**List of published papers of the candidate**

i) *The Turbulent Inner Self of Sylvia Plath: as revealed in her Letters and Journals*. Research Link, issue-68 vol viii(9),Nov2009.ISSN-0973-1628.p.n68-69.print.

ii) *The issue of existence and transcendence in the works of T.S.Eliot*.C.E.T.A,Raipur(C.G).3rd National Conference on Modern Man: Existence and Transcendence.print.

iii) Gynocentric struggle for identity amidst cultural setup in Chitra Banerjee's work *Palace of illusion.* Empowering women-literature in English.ed.Qamar Talat & A.A.Khan. March2013.ISBN:978-81-8435-392-1.p.n.93-101.print.

## Literary introduction to the author

An award winning author, poet and teacher, Chitra Banerjee Devkaruni is a revolutionary name in the field of women writers. Her themes include women, history, myth, magical realism, immigration, South Asian experiences and diversity. Her career started with Diabole Valley College as professor of creative writing. She runs a Mid-Peninsula Support Network for Battered Women which was started in 1990. She has been president of MAITRI – a help-line for South Asian women which she started in 1991. She is also on the advisory board of Daya and Prathm which are also similar sort of organization and help destitute women and children to lead a normal life. At present she teaches creative writing at the University of Houston. India as well as America forms the background of Devkaruni's book which depict the plight of Indian origin women frayed between Old and New World values. In 1995 Divakaruni's debut collection of stories appeared under the title of *Arranged Marriage.* It archives the liberation and the limitation experienced by Indian born girls and women in America, in their effort to maintain equilibrium between old treasured beliefs and new desires which are loaded with surprises.

In 1997, Divakaruni wrote her first novel, *The Mistress of Spices*. The protagonist in this book- Tilo, owns a spice shop in an Indian community in Oakland, California. She possesses a special power to cure body ailments with the help of spices. This story depicts her dilemma of duty and emotion which Tilo has to maintain and the constant agony which she has to undergo in order to pass this LITMUS TEST.

In 1998, Divakaruni's next novel *Sister of My Heart*, made its entry. In this work two cousins, Anju and Sudah, rely on each other for love, approval, and companionship. The women grow up together in the same house in Calcutta and have many similar experiences that bind them together, which leads them to feel as though they are sisters of the heart.

**Gynocentrism from view point of males, females and society**.

Gynocentrism is the practice of placing women's safety, comfort and general well-being at the center of social or political concern, and structuring life in the objective service of such interests.

This means that the interests of women are to be served based on the basis of objective criteria, based on what is truly in the woman's interest, not based on what the woman wants or demands. It is the man that makes the judgments regarding what is in the woman's best interest i.e. patriarchy. Patriarchy is most fundamentally in the service of children, women are elevated in patriarchy due to their association with children. Patriarchy is gynocentric because men are gynocentric. Patriarchy is an expression of men's desire and men's nature. Men are the ones who create and maintain patriarchy and establish the rules of the patriarchal social system.

A social structure should be gynocentric because it is the maintenance and support of the family unit that is a society's highest priority and women are the ones who are the primary responsible agents within the home. Patriarchal system maintains men's investment in women and in family life allowing for a prosperous society.

The literary scholar Elaine Showalter coined the term *gynocritic*s and sought to illuminate the "subculture" of women writers and readers. She refer to this project, suggesting in her article "Towards a Feminist Poetics" (1986) that Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of male tradition, and focus instead on the new visible world of female culture. Gynocentric feminism is concerned, therefore, to revalue sexual difference and femininity positively.

**Gynocentric ethos in the works of Chitra Banerjee**

Divakaruni's interest in women began after she left India, at which point she reevaluated the treatment of women there. Whether set in India or America Divakaruni's plot features Indian born woman caught in the dilemma of old and new world values.

In *Arranged Marriage* the stories are concerned with the emotions of women whose lives are affected by the Indian tradition of arranged marriages. Divakaruni beautifully tells stories about immigrant brides who are "both liberated and trapped by cultural changes" and who are struggling to carve out an identity of their own

*Mistress of Spices*, Tilo, a magical figure, uses spices to help the customers overcome difficulties but becomes helpless in her own case as she falls in love and it was against the ethics of her profession. She tries to be true to her profession but her heart revolts and if she listens to her heart, she has to incur the wrath of spices that will distract their power and they will never speak to her again. She was left to decide between life as a woman with special powers but no relations or ordinary women with someone to love her.

*Vine of Desire* which is considered to be a sequel of *Sister of My Heart* bring backs the story of Anju , who suffers a miscarriage and Sudah who was deserted by her husband. Both the friends feel that they will find relief in each other’s company and as a result Sudah comes with her daughter to stay with Anju and her husband. This brings adverse results and creates rift between two friends. Later on they unite again overcoming their feeling of love and hatred and regain their old bonding.

**Social and mythical issues**

In *Mistress of spices,* Devkaruni has raised many social issues like personal choice to pleasure in contrast to social obligations. As the protagonist Tilo was compelled to choose between her duties and her wishes. Other issues raised in this work are racism and generation gap.

*The Palace of Illusion* takes a female view on Mahabharata. The book explores all facets of Panchaali's life, including her part in her husbands' quest to regain their birthright, her complex friendship with Krishna, and her mysterious attraction towards Karana. At every step of her life she follows the traditions and customs meant for women but at the same time questions them fearlessly. It highlights the life of a woman who lives in a man's world. Through the swayamvar of Draupadi, Devkaruni has shown the bygone culture of marriage of princess which used to be more of a political treaty than union of two souls and how females are made to sacrifice themselves, even at the pyre of their own emotions and desires for the welfare of their land. *Victory Song* is rich with Indian culture, and includes the description of many Indian traditions and a portrayal of family and gender roles. Among many other inner struggles, Neela strives to understand these roles and her place within them.

In Banerjee's another expedition *Queen of dreams,* the protagonist Rakhi is not alone to suffer but her six year old daughter paints pictures of flaming wrecks and burning building that showcase the consequences of unbalanced family life on child psychology. It is a work full of myths and social issue of post 9/11.

*The Conch Bearer*, is a modern day fairy tale and adventure story about a twelve-year-old boy named Anand, a believer in magic and living a destitute life with his mother and ill sister in the city of Kolkata

## Home sickness and alienation

Her collection *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives,* has brought forth the feeling of alienation and home sickness experienced by Indians living in America. She has given a voice to their feeling through the stories *Mrs. Dutta Writes A Letter*, where a widow living in her son's Calfornia home discovers that her old world ways are an embarrassment to her daughter-in-law; and *The Blooming Season For Cacti*, where two women, uprooted from their native land by violence and deception, find unexpected solace in each other.

In *Neela: Victory Song*, the protagonist Neela feels totally left alone when her father leaves her in her teens and joins the struggle for freedom.

*Queen of Dreams* is a mystical and magical work by Devkaruni. Here the main character Rakhi is not the "queen" but it is her mother who has this magical power and she has exercised it to evaporate all memories from her daughter's mind about her past. This has made Rakhi alien to self as she has no memories to call her own, no past remembrance to cherish.

*One Amazing Thing* is a novel of psychological analysis rather than a novel of physical rescue. It is a novel that primarily examines whether a community can be built and whether true communication is possible, through storytelling, among a group of strangers who have nothing in common (or so they think) except a desire to go to India. Her main theme here is the power that stories have to heal people.

## CONCLUSION

Novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakarunifocuses intently on the experiences of women pursuing identities for themselves, the roles of women in India and America; their struggle to adapt to new ways of life when one's cultural traditions are in conflict with new cultural expectations; and the complexities of love between family members, lovers, and spouse.

She has shown female, struggle in different parts, different ages, and different manner through her works. Her novels are evidences of turbulent times females have faced in the past and are even facing today. In one of her work Banerjee has mentioned that there is no such thing as perfect life and we all have to live with this imperfections and carry forward our struggle for existence in this cultural setup by finding a common path which will be beneficial for all. This effort needs a voice strong enough to act as a beacon and a firm confidence to overcome all odds with firm self determination. This is what we witness in works and efforts of Chitra Banerjee. It has been a great learning experience to have delved in the novels of Banerjee and to arrive at a theme related to women as a woman in this cultural setup.

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Forwarded

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